

“I Know History”

Experience, Belief and Politics in the Post-Socialist Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Using the case study of new Canadians who support the annexation of Crimea by Russia, this paper shows how political convictions sometimes follow formation trajectories that are similar to those of experience-based spiritual beliefs. The paper contextualizes personal narratives of some Russians who once resided in republics of the former Soviet Union outside of Russia and who experienced social turmoil associated with the collapse of the Communist regime. It further provides comparative references to immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. KEYWORDS: Belief, Personal Narrative, Folklore and Politics

When Russian military troops entered Crimea in February 2014, social media became a battlefield between pro-Ukraine and pro-Russia supporters.¹ I unwittingly provoked a battle of my own by naively posting letters on Russian-language forums, calling upon Russians residing in North America to contact their

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embassies and condemn their country's military intervention in Ukraine. Although I had lived in Canada for over a decade by the time of this event, I am a native of Ukraine so shared feelings of devastation and uncertainty with a majority of my compatriots the world over. I realized, however, that some of my Russian readers may have different opinions on Ukraine's political path, since Ukraine itself was not politically uniform. While the majority of the country's citizens supported potential ties with Europe, many others, including most Crimeans, favoured integration with Russia. Understanding these complexities, I attempted to avoid any overt political statements, suggesting only that diplomacy was a better means of resolving political dispute than weapons. I assumed all would agree but, as it turned out, could not have been more wrong.

Many of my online interlocutors were fully convinced that the President of Russia was doing the right thing. Putin's perceived qualities, as emphasized by some of the forum participants, corresponded with the folkloristic understanding of the concept of "folk hero." Reflecting on literature regarding folk heroes, István Povedák summarizes that "heroes appear as a result of mass needs" and "they express and satisfy socio-cultural needs and desires generated from the bottom up" (2014:10). Hasan El-Shamy, among others, points out that folk heroes are associated with "heroic behaviors" that "include saving individuals and nations from destructive forces or leading them from danger" (2011:652). Such sentiments were clearly reflected in my interlocutors' remarks. For example, Nikolai, originally from Russia, mentioned: "Putin is my hero because of his smart foreign policies and his manly nature" (Nikolai, social media, referenced March 2, 2014).² In another example, Bakir, a Russian immigrant from Azerbaijan, pointed out:

Today, Vladimir Putin's politics are the only type of politics that are correct with regard to the West. Putin picked Russia up from its knees following the era of Yeltsin, who was a clown and a jerk, and who allowed the plundering and

humiliation of this great country. Russia is now once again feared. (Bakir, social media, referenced March 2, 2014)

The academic questions that arose from these discussions were informed by my initial emotional frustration. Considering that the majority of my interlocutors were skilled professionals (in fact, some of the most active contributors were employees of multi-national oil companies), their pro-Putin sentiments seemed paradoxical to me. These individuals chose to relocate to North America to pursue career options, financial opportunities and social services that were unavailable in their home countries yet they simultaneously supported the politics of a Russian President whose views and intensions were sharply anti-Western. These individuals chose to live in a Western democratic society that promotes respect for international laws and treaties, yet they supported political and military moves by Russia that compromised the established international order. The annexation of Crimea was a violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance signed by the United States, Great Britain and Russia and further endorsed by France and China (Yekelchik 2015:68). The Memorandum ensured Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity in exchange for the elimination of the country’s arsenal of nuclear weapons (Yekelchik 2015:68).

Discussing the Ukraine-Russia crisis with some Russian friends was especially upsetting. Though they themselves had never been to Ukraine, they appeared to have no interest in my point of view, and instead unquestioningly accepted information from Kremlin-sponsored news outlets. My attempts to engage in constructive discussion were met with increased aggression. The most hurtful moment occurred when a close friend cut all ties not only on social media but also in real life. This affected not only us but also our children. I had to find words to explain to my then four-year old son why he could no longer see his best friend. To my former friend, my condemnation of Putin’s actions meant my support of the Ukrainian

radical nationalist forces that, in her opinion, intended to destroy the Russian population of Ukraine.

My friend's sentiments mirrored the way the annexation of Crimea was recurrently legitimized in Russian media. She and other participants continuously bombarded online forums with news reports generated by those media as proof of the perceived planned genocide of Russians in Ukraine, interpreting Putin's moves as a noble attempt to save his people. For example, on March 3, 2014, Nikolai posted thirty-three links from Russian sources as, what he considered, clear evidence of these intentions. In another example, Viktor, originally from Estonia, described his North American friends who had family residing in eastern Ukraine. According to Viktor, "they want to live in Ukraine today, tomorrow and so on... but not be robbed, killed or raped" (Viktor, social media, referenced March 3, 2011). My Russian interlocutors, who appeared to be well adjusted in the West and fluent in English, refused to engage with political perspectives other than those of the Kremlin.

The figure of Vladimir Putin has gained a growing amount of academic attention, including studies devoted specifically to his image as a heroic leader. Such works focus predominantly on the political and socio-cultural implications behind image production processes in mass media as well as in elite, popular and consumer culture (e.g., Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Gosciolo 2013). They also tend to concentrate on the voices of political activists (e.g., Sperling 2015). I propose to expand a scholarly understanding of political heroisation by approaching it from a different angle, namely, the ethnography of the lives of regular people, including their responses to hero production processes.³

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study includes an autoethnographic component as it attempts to "connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis 2004:xix). It is also informed by "virtual ethnography" as defined by Christine Hine (1994; 2000). I reviewed the discussions in the above-mentioned and

similar online social venues. Understandably, “[v]irtual ethnography is necessarily partial” (Hine 2000:65). It informs us with “ideas of strategic relevance” but does not provide room for holistic contextualization (65). While this method allowed me to identify distinct patterns in Russian immigrants’ political convictions, it also left some gaps.

I attempted to fill these contextual niches with what Hine labels as “conventional ethnography” (1994). Some online participants were friends and acquaintances who I had met in various parts of Canada. Others were contributors to my fieldwork project devoted to immigrants from the former Socialist Bloc to the Canadian island of Newfoundland, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Newfoundland is widely perceived as a culturally homogeneous place, whose residents are predominantly of English and Irish decent. Its unique cultural setting and small immigrant population influences diaspora dynamics that are different from those that can be observed in places with large newcomer communities. For instance, Newfoundland’s context stimulates new Canadians to expand the notion of “their people” beyond a single ethnicity or country of origin.⁴ Given that sometimes as few as one or two families represent a particular ethnicity or country on the island, newcomers often seek contacts on the basis of a common historical and cultural past. One can frequently find immigrants from multiple post-Socialist states, including former Soviet republics such as Azerbaijan and Estonia that form the main focus of this paper, within the same walls, attending the same social gatherings.

I have had both personal and academic interest in these diaspora circles since the time of my arrival to Newfoundland in 2011 and have participated in many community and private events.⁵ In addition to numerous informal conversations with newcomers, I have conducted a number of in-depth interviews.⁶ Political topics were addressed extensively. Both prior to the Ukraine-Russia crisis and after its onset, I was interested in how sociopolitical dynamics in their home countries influence the new Canadians’ identities. Russia, the

dominant political power of the former Socialist Bloc, and its current president Vladimir Putin were often discussed in our conversations. The present paper draws upon these findings that, in turn, help to deeper contextualize some immigrants' online voices.

As expected, newcomers' political views are diverse and complex. I do not suggest that all Russian immigrants support the political moves of the current President of Russia. In fact, I met many individuals who sharply condemned Putin's politics. Rather, I wish to shed light on one distinct pattern in the political convictions of Russian immigrants. In particular, I focus on those many Russians who lionize Putin. Intriguingly, some of the most vocal individuals in this category previously resided in former Soviet republics outside of Russia.

While I engage with the voices of other individuals throughout the paper, I choose two narratives—that of Irina from Azerbaijan and that of Dasha from Estonia—as the main focus of my discussion. While recognizing their views as part of a broader pattern that, in turn, involves representatives of other former Soviet republics, I select the two stories for the following (methodological) reasons. Irina and Dasha were engaged in the above-mentioned online debates more actively than other participants, providing very extensive comments. It was their comments that initially stimulated me to undertake a folkloristic exploration. How could these two individuals produce such strikingly similar narratives about the Ukraine-Russia crisis (as we will see below), considering that they are originally from two different countries, live in two different parts of Canada, do not know each other, and shared their views on two different online platforms? Prior to the onset of the crisis, I had known Irina for two years, recorded one interview and had numerous private conversations with her outside of our online debates. Preceding the crisis, I had known Dasha for seven years and we had a very extensive online discussion that developed from her blog regarding the annexation of Crimea. My close personal acquaintance with these two individuals allowed me to

reveal meanings that I would not otherwise have been able to understand. Before I present Irina and Dasha’s narratives, let me highlight some important events that preceded the annexation of Crimea and triggered the expressions of pro-Putin views.

PRECEDING THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA: MAIDAN

The annexation of Crimea was preceded by mass scale protests in Ukraine that became commonly referred to as *Maidan* (Square) (protesters initially gathered in Kyiv’s *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* or Independence Square) and lasted from late November 2013 until the end of February 2014. The demonstrations began as a citizens’ reaction to an unexpected political move by then-President Viktor Yanukovych. Under pressure from Putin, Yanukovych decided to postpone the signing of a long-awaited Ukraine-European Union association agreement (Marples 2015:9). Later, due to the government’s brutal reactionary responses to the protests, the focus of the Maidan shifted to the “innate and grotesque corruption of the ruling regime, of the prevalence of oligarchs who had enriched themselves at the expense of the state, and the lack of legal reforms” (Marples 2015:10-11). The most tragic outbreak took place in February 2014, when escalating physical violence resulted in the deaths of over 100 people. While the protesters predominantly threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the police, snipers responded by firing on the protesters with live ammunition. The orders to use deadly force are widely believed to have come directly from the Yanukovych’s government. Some reports state that snipers were instructed to not only fire upon the protesters but also to target members of the militia in an attempt to both cause uncertainty regarding the source of fire and to offer justification for forcefully removing protesters. In the ensuing confusion yet other reports suggested that both Russian agents and opposition forces had had a hand in the massacre (Marples 2015:11). The Yanukovych government eventually fell and the former President fled the country on February 21, 2014, finding asylum in Russia (Marples 2015:12).

The Maidan protestors represented all strata of Ukrainian society—“elderly and children, urban and rural, among them leftists, feminists, nationalists, and LGBT activists” (Philips 2014:415). Although Far Right political forces were present and remained very vocal throughout the period of the protests, their overall influence was rather marginal. As historian William Risch (2015) observes, this was especially made clear by the presidential (May 2014) and parliamentary (October 2014) elections following the Maidan. For example, in their respective presidential runs, Oleh Tiahnybok, leader of the nationalist Svoboda party, scored as low as 1.16 percent support while the Right Sector Party’s Dmytro Yarosh received only 0.07% of the vote (Risch 2015:142). Neither Svoboda nor Right Sector scored the minimum 5 percent required for their parties to hold seats in parliament (Risch 2015:143).

FAKE NEWS OF RUSSIA

Although the Kremlin initially denied the presence of the Russian troops in Crimea, it eventually explained the annexation of the territory as necessary. The Russian government suggested the potential outcomes of the Maidan to be threatening to the Russian/Russian-speaking population of the peninsula. While the Maidan was complex and multi-faceted, both politically and socially, in the Kremlin-sponsored media it was presented as a clear and straightforward phenomenon, portrayed as an extremist nationalist movement sponsored by the West that, in turn, wanted to disempower Russia. Even though, in reality, the influence of the Far Right was rather marginal, it [the Far Right] “served as a smokescreen” for Putin to annex Crimea “under the pretext of ‘protecting Russians abroad’ from supposed virulently nationalist, ‘fascist’ Ukrainians” (Philips 2014:415).

Timothy Snyder, the renowned Yale-based scholar of Eastern European history, in his discussion of the annexation of Crimea, defines Russian “fake news” as a “fictional text that pose[s] as a piece of journalism” (2018:11). “Fake news” of

this kind works effectively in what Snyder proposes to understand as “the politics of eternity” that can be observed in Putin’s Russia (8). This type of politics “places one nation at the center of a cyclical story of victimhood,” where no one is perceived to be “responsible because we all know that the enemy is coming no matter what we do” (8). Putin is an example of “eternity politicians” who “spread the conviction that government cannot aid society as a whole, but can only guard against threats” (8). While studying its purposes, mechanisms, and historical roots, other scholars and journalists provide detailed analyses of Russian “fake news” under a variety of umbrella terms, including “information warfare” (Darczewska 2014), “propaganda machine” (Herpen 2015), or simply “Russian propaganda” (Bardach-Yalov 2012; Gerder and Zavisca 2016).

The general phenomenon of “fake news” has recently engaged many scholars, including folklorists, largely because of widespread use of the term by contemporary figures such as current US president Donald Trump. Lynne McNeill suggests that folklorists’ responsibilities regarding “fake news” should be twofold—“educating and informing others about the factual truth of a matter as well as the underlying cultural currents to which the false information is speaking” (2018:499). Also related to this idea is Andrea Kitta’s suggestion that we consider “fake news” as a system of belief. While focusing specifically on health-related matters, Kitta argues that fake news stories often “express already established beliefs and people share them *because* these stories already fit into their belief system either because they already believe them or because they seem believable, demonstrating a form of confirmation bias” (2018:409). Social scientists Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews find confirmation bias to be one of the most important factors that contribute to the success of specifically Russian “fake news” (Paul and Matthews 2016:6).

Considering that the phenomenon of Russian propaganda has generated a substantial amount of academic and media attention, I do not engage extensively with the question of factual

truth, but focus instead on the contextual currents that make “fake news” from Russia a believable matter and a reliable source for some people. In line with the conventional folkloristic understanding that boundaries are barely clear when it comes to emic perspectives on “real and parody, rumour and truth, conspiracy and fact” (Mould 2018:373), I contextualize and analyze fluidity between “fake news” and individual life experiences. This study pays particular attention to the processes of formation of pro-Putin beliefs that, I argue, follow trajectories similar to experienced-based supernatural and spiritual beliefs. I understand belief broadly, as folklorist David Hufford describes as “the certainty that something is true” (1995:19).

RUSSIAN VOICES FROM AZERBAIJAN AND ESTONIA

Irina, a young woman originally from Azerbaijan, in response to my call to condemn Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, pointed out that, in her opinion, Putin’s decision to send military troops to Crimea was “the only way out of the situation that has occurred, because Russian troops will prevent a civil war” (Irina, social media, referenced March 2, 2014). She further reinforced her position by drawing parallels between the discussed situation in Ukraine and relatively recent events in her hometown of Baku, referring to a time immediately preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. Irina witnessed an escalation in the conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, when radical nationalist Azerbaijani groups committed atrocities against Armenians living in the city. In particular, Irina emphasized the dramatic clashes of January 1990, when Soviet military troops arrived in Baku to provide what she perceived to be noble humanitarian aid in the context of criminal chaos:

I know history and personally witnessed certain events. On January 20, 1990, when the Russian [Soviet] troops entered Baku people also thought that it was an invasion. In fact, it is still widely presented as such today. However, if it was not for the army, the crowd that was looting and

killing the Armenians could have attacked the Russians as well. Thanks to the Soviet soldiers, we returned to normal life. (Irina, social media, referenced March 2, 2014)

Irina makes historic parallels between her concerns for her own people who were in need of defence in the context of the inter-ethnic conflict in Azerbaijan and the current protection of Russians that, in her opinion, is required in Ukraine.

Similarities can be seen between Irina’s narrative and that of Dasha, a young female immigrant from Estonia. While discussing the situation in Ukraine in her social media post, Dasha repeatedly referred to the home country she left for North America ten years prior:

I understand very well exactly what the Russians in Crimea were afraid of. Moreover, I definitely know the situation the Crimeans would end up in ten or fifteen years from now, had they not joined Russia today. One doesn’t need to consult a fortune-teller. They would be in the exact same situation the Russians found themselves in Estonia. They would have been in a shitty situation, to be honest. (Dasha, social media, referenced May 2, 2014)

While providing examples, Dasha was especially bitter as she shared the story of her mother, a speech pathologist employed by a Russian daycare in Estonia. According to Dasha, Estonian law required daycare workers to pass an Estonian language test. Failure to achieve a passing grade resulted in an annual fine. “I am convinced that in a few years Russian speech pathologists and daycare teachers in Crimea would be paying language fines in exactly the same way,” commented Dasha (Dasha, social media, referenced May 2, 2014). She continued:

Had Crimea not joined Russia, it would not only be people of the older generation who would have encountered problems. Even ambitious and educated young Russian

speakers who knew the official [Ukrainian] language and had Ukrainian citizenship, would have had it very-very difficult. They would have had to put their lives in order to prove that they were not Putin's supporters and that they were not the hand of Moscow; that it's not them who sent representatives of the [Ukrainian] nation to Siberia in the 1940s, [...] not them, not them, not them [...] In a Ukrainian Crimea, all Russians would have had to write this in capital letters on their foreheads. They would have had to write and highlight it ten times—the way it is written and highlighted now on the forehead of every Russian in Estonia. (Dasha, social media, referenced May 2, 2014)

Dasha addresses dramatic moments in Soviet history, when many were persecuted for their political views, forcefully stripped of material possessions and exiled to concentration camps in Siberia. Dasha finds it unfair that the present-day generation of Russians in Estonia is widely viewed as responsible for the brutal deeds of their ancestors. Unlike Irina and other individuals quoted above, Dasha is not an uncritical fan of Putin. She even supported the Maidan at its initial stages. However, it is not Putin but her fellow Russians that constitute the main concern for Dasha. Thus, like Irina, she approves, albeit implicitly, of Putin's perceived mission to protect Russians living outside of Russia.

CONTEXTUALIZING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Irina's and Dasha's historical references support sociologist Barbara Misztal's remarks about memory, an entity that Misztal finds to be "intersubjectively constituted":

[...] while it is an individual who remembers, his or her memory exists, and is shaped by, their relation with, what has been shared with others and that it is, moreover, always memory of intersubjective past, of a past time lived in relation to other people. (2003:6)

Through personal narratives, Irina and Dasha present their individual memories of the life Russians shared with the titular ethnic groups in Azerbaijan and Estonia. Folklorist Sandra Stahl, one of the pioneers in the study of personal experience narratives, points out that “[t]he personal narrative seems the ideal vehicle for expressing ‘attitude’” and “the attitude is what gives the narrative its meaning” (1977: 22). Somewhat in line with Myszal’s argument, Stahl further expands: “[n]evertheless, no attitude itself will exist independently, idiosyncratically: it will always be shared by group members, varying only in the degree of relative importance each individual personality affords it” (1977:22).

Folklorist Elliott Oring calls upon the significance of examining the “structures, meanings and functions” of narratives in relation to their larger four contexts—cultural, social, individual and comparative (1986:135). Although Oring’s focus is on traditional (formulaic) forms of narratives such as myth, legend and tale, his idea of the four contexts as important background factors that reveal deeper meaning can be applied to personal experience narratives as well. It is also important to keep in mind that, as anthropologist Marita Eastmond states, personal experience narratives “cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present” (2007: 250). In light of these studies, let me further address the larger past and present-day contexts of Irina’s and Dasha’s personal narratives. These contexts, in turn, will shed light on the formation of their “attitudes” regarding the present-day crisis between Ukraine and Russia.

RUSSIANS AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

While all citizens of the former USSR were affected by the collapse of the Soviet system, some ethnic Russians experienced a very intense shift. As numerous studies by historians, sociologists and political scientists inform us (e.g., Shlapentokh et al. 1994; Kolstoe 1995; Chinn 1996; Lapidus 1996; Lebedeva

1997; Savoskul 2001; Kolstoe 2001; Lauristin and Heidmets 2002), many Russians faced deep social trauma in the late Soviet—early post-Soviet period. Even though official Soviet political discourse promoted internationalization and the equality of all Soviet people, in reality there was a clear hierarchy where Russian culture occupied the dominant position. To provide just one example, Russian was the main language of the entire Soviet Union while other languages had secondary status. It was neither mandatory nor necessary for a Russian to learn another language even if he or she lived outside of Russia.

This situation changed in the context of the nationalization processes that took place in the former republics in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. As many as 25 million Russians living in countries of the former Soviet Union but outside of Russia (such as Irina's and Dasha's families) were suddenly part of the minority. They found themselves inside new international borders that had been imposed on them externally (Kolstoe 1995). In other words, these Russians were transformed from representatives of the dominant nation, who had felt at home anywhere within the Soviet Union, into diaspora communities (Kolstoe 1995, 2001; Lauristin and Heidmets 2002). However, even though Russian minorities shared many experiences across all former Soviet republics, there were also significant differences. Nationalization processes acquired contextually specific forms and took place with varying degrees of intensity in different former Soviet republics.

RUSSIANS IN AZERBAIJAN

The conflict in Azerbaijan that Irina addresses saw the loss of many lives and was politically complex. Irina's brief reference does not, of course, cover its full complexity. Neither, as we will see below, does it match leading academic interpretations. It is beyond the scope of this work to provide a detailed history of the conflict, especially considering that it has received a substantial amount of academic attention (e.g., Croissant 1998;

Cornell 1999; Waal 2003; Geukjian 2012). Instead, I highlight some aspects that relate to the present study.

The late Soviet and early post-Soviet conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia centred around Nagorno-Karabakh, a region in Azerbaijan populated predominantly by ethnic Armenians. In order to understand the nuances of antagonism between these two Caucasian peoples, one needs to consider the millennia-long historical and cultural formation processes of what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan (Dragadze 1989:58-70). Understandably, both Azerbaijani and Armenian academics each present their own emotionally charged versions of their countries' histories and identities, each claiming Nagorno-Karabakh as their territory (Croissant 1998:10-13). Outside scholars insist that the population of the southeast Caucasus was always mixed, with no historical basis to indicate that it is exclusively Azerbaijani or Armenian or that it can even be split between the two groups (Croissant 1998:12).

During the Soviet era, while some tensions between the two ethnic groups existed, neither side experienced any open violence and “intercommunal relations were good” (Waal 2003:100). However, the late Soviet democratization policies of General-Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev created fertile ground for increased Armenian efforts toward making Nagorno-Karabakh part of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Dragadze 1989:55; Geukjian 2012:129-44). As Moscow initially remained relatively passive regarding the issue, clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians continued to escalate in the late 1980s. One of the most dramatic riots took place in late February 1988 in the city of Sumgait, located approximately thirty kilometers from Baku. Numerous brutalities, organized predominantly by young Azerbaijani men, were reported, including violent acts against Armenian women in a maternity hospital (Dragadze 1989:56).⁷ The pogrom that targeted the Armenians of the city is considered to be the main trigger for the subsequent full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Another dramatic major event that took place in the context of the growing conflict between the two countries is described by Irina in her narrative. The month of January 1990 was dubbed “Black January,” as Soviet troops took control of Baku “after a five-hour battle that left more than a hundred Azeris dead and over a thousand wounded” (Croissant 1998:37). Unlike Irina, political anthropologist Tamara Dragadze, among others, does not believe that Soviet troops arrived in Baku to perform a humanitarian task. Based on remarks made at the time by some military officials, Dragadze insists that this was, rather, Gorbachev’s attempt to uphold Soviet power, especially considering that the operation took place several days after the last Armenians had left Azerbaijan (Dragadze 1996:281). Many scholars are unanimous in their assessment of the effect of “Black January” on Azerbaijan’s future relationship with the Soviet Union. The appearance of Soviet tanks, operated by Russian soldiers, that indiscriminately killed and wounded people meant the end of the Soviet system in Azerbaijan (Dragadze 1996:281).

In her narrative, Irina does not engage with these complex historical matters. Rather, she tells her personal story—that of an ethnic Russian who, while residing in Azerbaijan at the time, was caught in the middle of the inter-ethnic clash. For Irina, the Soviet troops were saviours who prevented anyone from potentially getting to her people. Even though Azerbaijanis and Armenians were the main groups involved, the crisis deeply affected Russians as well. Irina’s fear and discomfort is reflective of broader sociological findings on the situation of Russians in Azerbaijan around the country’s escalated crisis with Armenia. Reportedly, as many as 195,000 or nearly 50% of 392,000 Russians who resided in Azerbaijan as of 1989, left the country between 1989 and 2002 (Heleniak 2004:109).

During an informal conversation, Irina recalled a personal incident that occurred in Baku shortly after the collapse of the Soviet regime. She was riding the bus while in the latter stages of pregnancy. The bus was crowded, but no one offered her a

seat. According to Irina, the reason was that her Slavic (white) appearance was different from that of the indigenous population. Irina now feels very nostalgic for the Soviet times because, as she says, "there were no nationalities in the Soviet Union." She believes that the collapse of the Soviet Union brought about national divisions and conflicts. She, of course, speaks from the point of view of a representative of the dominant Russian culture.

RUSSIANS IN ESTONIA

In her narrative, Dasha addresses the complex situation of Russians residing in Estonia. While Azerbaijan's Soviet history began in 1922, Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union much later, in 1940. Since that time anti-Soviet and, by extension, anti-Russian sentiments, have been prominent in Estonia, the result of numerous brutalities and hegemonic policies of the Soviet regime that are still within the living memories of many Estonians. For example, the early Sovietization process included the expropriation of private property and deportations. Accounts report that on the night of June 14, 1941, over ten thousand people were forcibly "sent to Siberia in cattle cars" (Kionka and Vetik 1996:132-33). In another example, the cultural dimensions of Estonian anti-Russian sentiments increased by the 1970s, especially as a reaction to an official Soviet policy regarding the increased promotion of the Russian language in non-Russian republics of the USSR. As Russian became more widely taught at Estonian schools in 1981, many Estonians viewed this as a great threat to their cultural identity (Kionka and Vetik 1996:133). The Estonian language was also pushed to the margins in professional spheres, including civil aviation and the merchant navy, for example (Vetik 1993:274).

As was the case in other Soviet republics, Gorbachev's late Soviet democratization endeavours created the fertile ground for independence-related initiatives in Estonia. Fortunately, unlike in Azerbaijan and some other former Soviet republics, including neighbouring Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia gained

independence from the Soviet Union without bloodshed. The Russian population of Estonia found itself in a difficult situation following the declaration of independence. The status of immigrants who came to the country during the Soviet era became one of the most controversial issues facing the new democratic government. In 1992, the government reenacted Estonia's 1938 citizenship law, and only those who had resided in Estonia prior to the Soviet occupation and their descendants could be recognized as citizens (Kionka and Vetik 1996:142; Kolstoe 1995:120-21). Thus, the post-war immigrants, who initially believed that they had simply moved to another part of their own country—the USSR—were now “considered illegal immigrants or occupants” in post-Soviet Estonia (Kolstoe 1995:112). Three years of residence in the country and some knowledge of the Estonian language were mandatory for one to become eligible for citizenship. These new requirements applied not only to potential newcomers but also to those non-Estonians who had been residing in Estonia for years prior to independence (Kionka and Vetik 1996:140-42).

It is not surprising that such changes deeply affected the Russian population of Estonia who, in 1989, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, had represented slightly over 30% of the country's total population (Sencerman 2016:100). The Estonian government undertook a number of further steps to ease growing ethnic tensions. One example was the Law on Local Elections that was adopted in 1993. The right to vote was given not only to the citizens of Estonia but also to those non-Estonian nationals who had resided in particular election areas for five years preceding the election (Kionka and Vetik 1996:143).

Comparative politics scholar Raivo Vetik (2011), while reviewing the growing body of academic literature on Estonian integration policies, finds the literature to range from optimistic to very critical. Some academics insist that the need to address the concerns of the new Russian minority “has accelerated the transformation of Estonia from an ethnic nation (characterized

by the historically dominant position of defensive nationalism) to a modern civic nation” (Lauristin and Heidmets 2002: 20; see also Vetik 2011: 40). However, Vetik finds that many other authors do not share such an optimistic view. For instance, Vello Pettai and Klara Hallik, while analyzing the most recent integration policies implemented by the Estonian political elite, go so far as to argue that “the aim is still to help non-Estonians join an Estonian-defined nation-state” (Pettai and Hallik 2002: 507; see also Vetik 2011: 41).

Clearly, Dasha’s sentiments are in line with the latter, more critical interpretations of the situation of Russians in Estonia. Olga, an older Russian also from Estonia, who has lived in Canada for the last twenty years, shed more light on Dasha’s views (Olga, interviewed by M. Lesiv, October 5, 2018). She related numerous personal experience accounts illustrating ethnic tensions in the country. One of her stories involved a former co-worker, an elderly Estonian who, according to Olga, was an aggressive Russophobe. The co-worker and her family had been exiled to Siberia at some point in the past. This co-worker would occasionally bring to work old photographs that reflected her family’s wealth and well-being in the pre-Soviet past. She would show the photographs to Olga and would say angrily, “Look what you’ve done!” The Estonian co-worker viewed Olga as complicit in the Soviet atrocities and as part of the collective Russian enemy. This example closely resonates with Dasha’s descriptions of Russian experiences in Estonia that, in turn, led to her fear for the future of Russians in Crimea, had the peninsula not become part of Russia.

Even though Olga has never been supportive of the Soviet regime, had joyfully celebrated its collapse and has a complex, rather than polarized, view of the present-day crisis between Ukraine and Russia, what she shares with Dasha is the view of Russians as a suppressed segment of Estonia’s present-day population. According to Olga, while tensions in Estonia have always existed, they significantly increased in the late Soviet—early post-Soviet period. It was these tensions that influenced

Olga's decision to leave Estonia twenty years ago. During a recent visit to her home country, she met an old friend. Despite the fact that the friend and her family are economically successful and own several businesses, they still regret not leaving Estonia. They continue to feel social discrimination. The only factor that helps is that their adult Estonian-born daughters have native fluency in Estonian. As a result, the daughters take responsibility when it comes to important business-related tasks.

PARALLEL NARRATIVES

The lives of Russian minorities in late Soviet—early post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Estonia displayed contextually specific differences, despite many commonalities. However, neither Irina nor Dasha appear to consider any such differences while reacting to the annexation of Crimea. Intriguingly, Dasha openly admitted that she did not have much knowledge of Ukraine's history with Russia. She talked exclusively through the prism of Estonia, and did not take into account Ukrainian contextual complexities that may not necessarily mirror those in her home country. Neither did Irina. Both individuals instead presented what I propose to understand as *parallel narratives* that exist alongside dominating and more widely accepted stories. In Irina's and Dasha's cases, their parallel narratives circulated alongside the dominating political points of view conveyed by the majority of the media in the democratic world, strongly condemning the annexation of Crimea. Parallel narratives communicate one's own reflections on a particular event or situation and its potential outcomes. However, the reflections are not based on a careful examination of that event or situation in its own context. They are, instead, grounded in the narrator's personal experiences involving incidents that may appear to be similar.

Some basic facts indicate that the situation of ethnic Russians in Ukraine cannot be easily equated with that of their counterparts in Azerbaijan and Estonia. One of the most obvious

factors is that Russians do not represent a visible minority in Ukraine as they do in Azerbaijan. Discrimination on the basis of one's physical appearance is not a significant factor.

While Ukraine has undergone its own nationalization processes, post-Soviet ethnic controversies had not reached the same degree of intensity as they had in other former Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan and Estonia, prior to the annexation of Crimea. This can partly be explained by Ukraine's close cultural and geographical proximity to Russia (Kolstoe 1995:166). Even the ongoing tensions regarding the status of the Ukrainian and Russian languages in Ukraine (see Kolstoe 1995:170-199 for details) cannot be equated with those in Estonia. While the status of Ukrainian as the official language may cause discomfort for some in Russian minority circles, knowledge of Ukrainian or the lack of it has never affected the citizenship status of those who relocated to Ukraine during the Soviet era. Russian is still widely spoken in Ukraine. It was a commonly used language during the Maidan protests, especially in the movement's epicenter in the predominantly Russian-speaking capital of Kyiv.

The cultural situations with the Russian language in Ukraine and Estonia are hardly comparable. According to Katja Koort (2014), Estonia is geographically, culturally, and linguistically closer to the northern Europe than to eastern Europe. The Estonian language, as one of the most important identity markers in Estonia, is part of the Finno-Ugric language group and the Uralic language family. Thus, Estonian is distantly removed from Russian, which belongs to the Slavic group of Indo-European languages (Koort 2014:67).

To return to Dasha's narrative, it is now clear that her mother's struggle with the Estonian language test may not have much to do with the mother's unwillingness to learn Estonian, as I initially thought. It may, rather, be connected with her difficulties to embrace a very different linguistic system at a later stage in life. In contrast to the situation in Estonia, similarities between Ukrainian and Russian, languages that share common

Slavic roots, make it possible for nearly all citizens of Ukraine to understand both languages, with many Ukrainian citizens fully bilingual. A linguistic struggle of the Estonian intensity does not coincide with the reality in Ukraine. Similarly, Russians in Azerbaijan constitute a more pronounced linguistic and cultural “other” than their compatriots in Ukraine. Despite these and other obvious differences in the situations of Russians in the former Soviet republics, I was unable to convince my online interlocutors to look at Russians in Ukraine through the lens of the specifically Ukrainian contextual realities.

EXPERIENCE-BASED POLITICAL BELIEFS

There are numerous reasons explaining why Russian government-controlled propaganda is very effective (see, for example, Paul and Matthews 2016). In Russia, its effectiveness is reinforced by the Kremlin’s growing suppression of independent democratic media and citizens’ access to information. This, however, should not apply in the same way to my interlocutors, the majority of whom are educated professionals, fluent in English and with access to multiple sources of information in North America.

The roots of pro-Putin views are often addressed in relation to the Russian imperialist mentality. While I can recognize the imperialist undertone in the narratives of Nikolai and Bakir quoted earlier, I do not perceive the same sentiments coming from Irina and Dasha. Their narratives (as well as those of Viktor introduced earlier) expressed genuine concern for their Russian compatriots.

Folkloristic scholarship focusing on supernatural belief, while seemingly unrelated to politics, can actually shed light on this political situation. David Hufford (1982) first revealed the significant role of physical experience in the formation of one’s beliefs. Hufford showed that some beliefs are not simply parts of irrational traditional worldviews passed down through generations, as was widely viewed by previous scholars, but, rather, are emergent and rationally develop from concrete

physical experiences, constituting part of what he calls the “experiential source hypothesis” (1982) or “experience-centered theory” (1995). Hufford’s studies significantly influenced other scholars’ approaches to spiritual and religious beliefs (e.g., McClenon 1995; Magliocco 2004: 95-121). Elsewhere (Lesiv 2017), while discussing modern Ukrainian Pagan ideologies in relationship to nationalism and cosmopolitanism, I argue that pre-existing experience-informed beliefs regarding Russians as either blood brothers or blood enemies shape the religious cosmologies of today’s Pagans.

While expanding on a relationship between experience and belief, the present study is not related to things religious or spiritual but, rather, deals with purely political issues. It shows how a folkloristic approach can shed light on political matters, illustrating that some political convictions follow trajectories of formation that are similar to those of experience-based spiritual and religious beliefs. It is not physical encounters (the focus of Hufford’s work) but social experiences that play significant roles in the formation of political beliefs. My interlocutors display firm beliefs that Russians are political victims, and these beliefs have rationally developed from their own experiences. Although triggered by the events in Ukraine, their comments are not about Ukraine and its internal and external crisis but, rather, about themselves—traumatized Russians who felt they needed protection. This is why Irina’s *parallel narrative* is focused predominantly on the memories of her experiences as a Russian in Azerbaijan while Dasha’s is based on her and her family’s lives in Estonia. These memories allow both individuals to rationalize that Russians in Ukraine would face exactly the same fate that they had endured in Azerbaijan and Estonia. Irina’s experience of “Black January” triggered fear of physical danger for her compatriots in Crimea, had it not been annexed and, thus, “saved,” by Russia. Considering her family’s experiences in post-Soviet Estonia, Dasha did not appear to be concerned about potential safety of Russians in Ukraine. However, she

expressed worries for the potential socio-political comfort of her compatriots in Crimea, had it not joined Russia.

Russians like Irina and Dasha, who became part of marginalized diaspora groups in their home countries due to the nationalization processes, have developed a need for protection, either consciously or sub-consciously. Now relocated to North America, these Russians have been displaced twice, living through the experience of what the Spanish studies scholar David Wacks has termed “double diaspora” (Wacks 2015). The two experiences are not identical in their nature and dramatic intensity, of course. In the former case, Soviet Russians living outside of Russia did not physically relocate but were, rather, symbolically “displaced” by external political forces. In the latter case, they made a conscious choice to emigrate in search of better economic and professional opportunities. Nonetheless, any relocation, especially when accompanied by cultural and linguistic adjustment, implies a move outside one’s comfort zone.

Many of my online interlocutors, whether explicitly or implicitly, communicated varying degrees of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, a place where Russians felt empowered and, thus, comfortable and safe. Their privileged position was shaken by the collapse of the USSR and their subsequent double diaspora experiences. Thus, these individuals understand the situation in Ukraine through the prism of their personal traumas and resulting beliefs in Russians as victims. It is these beliefs that, in turn, make immigrants more easily susceptible to “fake news.” In fact, what is widely treated as “fake news” by outsiders, appears to be true and believable to my interlocutors from their emic perspectives because it resembles the realities of their lived experiences.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DETOUR: EXPERIENCE-BASED BELIEFS IN THE LARGER POST-SOCIALIST WORLD

Experience-informed political beliefs do not appear to be limited to Russian immigrants but embrace the larger post-Communist world. One example is the former Yugoslavia, where

Serbia's position was similar to that of Russia within the USSR. With the collapse of the Communist regime, and the subsequent traumatic military conflicts including the Croatian war of Independence, Yugoslavia underwent nationalization processes that resembled those in the Soviet republics. As a result, Serbs lost their privileged status. Thus, the political convictions of some Serbian immigrants display parallels to those of their Russian counterparts. When I asked Luka, my young male Serbian research participant, if Serbian and Croatian, often referred to as Serbo-Croatian, are indeed the same language, he firmly responded: “Yes, it's basically the same language” (Luka, interviewed by M. Lesiv, January 30, 2018). Intriguingly, three of my young Croatian consultants, interviewed together, reacted to the same question very differently: “No, no,” they exclaimed, and then elaborated that while there are a large number of similarities, the two languages are about 40% different from one another (Lesiv, fieldnotes, May 9, 2018). Luka's view is very similar to that of Irina from Azerbaijan, who emphasized *sameness* by insisting that, “there were no nationalities in the Soviet Union,” communicating the position of the dominant power.

It may have appeared to Irina that there were “no nationalities” in the USSR because most people spoke her language and were expected to embrace her Russian culture. As an ethnic Russian, she felt comfortable and safe in Soviet Azerbaijan, and, thus, feels nostalgic for the Soviet past. However, non-Russian ethnic groups were culturally and politically suppressed and, thus, tried to regain their unique ethnic identities during the post-Soviet nationalization processes. Similarly, as a representative of the dominant Serbian culture, Luka feels nostalgic for the former Yugoslavia. By stressing sameness between Serbian and Croatian, he symbolically communicates the pointlessness of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Intriguingly, even though Serbian and Croatian are very similar,⁸ my Croatian participants emphasize *difference*. By doing so, they symbolically distance themselves from Serbs, attempting to escape the dominating powers of their own past.

According to Luka, many in present-day Serbia view Putin as a hero, and this image of the Russian president is reinforced by the Serbian press. One of the messages disseminated by media outlets is that Putin will assist Serbia with powerful military weaponry to protect itself from NATO and the West (Luka, interviewed by M. Lesiv, January 30, 2018). This is yet another example showing that some present-day political convictions have experiential roots in the past.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Focusing on individual political voices from their emic perspectives, this study reveals experiential foundation in some present-day political beliefs. The latter, I argue, sometimes follows formation trajectories that are similar to those of experienced-based perceptions of the supernatural and the spiritual. In the cases of some Russian Canadians, it is their own memories of the late Soviet and post-Soviet context in their home countries that shape their inclination to believe “fake news,” blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. The media’s narratives bring immigrants the comfort of belonging to what they imagine as the powerful nation of Russia ruled by a strong hero, and the sense of protection that they once lost. In order to be protected, there is a need for what Umberto Eco has famously termed the “invention of the enemy” (Eco 2013).

NOTES

- 1 A significant part of this research was supported by a 2017-2019 Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant File Number 430-2017-00006). Parts of the earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2015 International Society for Ethnology and Folklore Biannual Congress, the 2017 Folklore Studies Association of Canada Annual Conference, and the 2018 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting.
- 2 All communication involving Russian immigrants that is cited in this paper was in Russian. All translations from the original are by the author. Interviews with Serbian and Croatian immigrants were

conducted in English. Considering that this paper touches upon sensitive political issues, all participants’ names have been altered and detailed identifying information, including the names of particular social media platforms where our discussions took place, has not been provided.

- 3 Folklorist Anastasiya Astapova uses a similar approach while tracing several patterns in vernacular responses to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka’s official and unofficial biographies in present-day Belarus (Astapova 2016).
- 4 While varying in their disciplinary approaches and particular focuses, a growing body of scholarly works on the topic reflect the dominating tendency of diaspora groups to form on the basis of a single ethnicity or country of origin. Among many others, see Akenson (1996) for a discussion of the Irish diaspora in Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States; Bielenberg (2000) for accounts on the Irish diaspora the USA, Great Britain and the British Empire; Adachi (2006) for studies of Japanese diasporas in Manchuria, China, Canada, the Philippines, Singapore and Latin America; Isurin (2011) for the Russian diaspora in the USA, Germany, and Israel; Satzewich (2003) and Khanenko-Friesen (2015) for studies of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada; Kõngäs-Maranda (1980) for an exploration of Finnish diaspora folklore in the USA; and Mehta and Singh (2008) for a study of diasporic Indians elderly in five countries.
- 5 I have attended an Orthodox Christian Mission (that unites immigrants from post-Socialist countries where Orthodox Christianity is the predominant religion, including Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine) on a regular basis, approximately once a month. I have visited a local restaurant (owned by a Bosnian family), a major place of gathering for newcomers from the former Yugoslavia, on several occasions. I also attended and documented an annual New Year’s celebration (that drew Russian-speaking attendees from many former republics of the Soviet Union) in 2011 and 2012. In addition, I have participated in numerous private events organized by immigrants from the former Socialist Bloc.
- 6 I am grateful to all immigrants from the former Socialist Bloc who participated in this study, including those whose voices are not directly included in the present work, for sharing their thoughts, memories and experiences with me. To date, I have conducted 32 interviews with 41 individuals, ranging in length from one to four hours. While in this paper I rely on my own interviews and participant observation, I am thankful to Christina Robarts for her help at the earlier stages

of this research that informed my overall understanding of diaspora experiences. In Winter 2013, she conducted 11 additional interviews with East European immigrants in Newfoundland under my supervision as part of her placement work with the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador. I am also indebted to folklorist Dale Jarvis, for his initiatives and collaboration on this project.

- 7 See Shahmurationian (1990) for oral history accounts of the survivors of the Sumgait tragedy.
- 8 In addition to having had many private conversations with immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, I have formally interviewed ten of these newcomers. Regardless of their specific countries of origin and current political views, all stressed that there are no language barriers between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, even though they speak languages that are identified as different from one another. A Bosnian immigrant shared jokes about an interpreter translating languages spoken in the former Yugoslavia. Although the interpreter thinks highly of himself, he is in the butt of the jokes because each language shares numerous words that are identical and, thus, require no translation (Lesiv, fieldnotes, March 1, 2019).

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